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Qualitative Research Review

Beyond narrative coherence: An introduction

Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christer Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo and Maria Tamboukou

John Benjamins Publishing Company

2010

196 pages

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Beyond Narrative Coherence is a bold collection of essays which may mark a turning-point in the interdisciplinary study of narrative. In their introduction, the four editors – Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christer Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo and Maria Tamboukou – present a powerful critique of the prevailing ‘coherence paradigm’ in narrative studies: ‘The normative mission to find and value coherence marginalizes many narrative phenomena, omits non-fitting narrators, encourages scholars to read narratives obsessively from the perspective of coherence, and poses ethically questionable pressures upon narrators who have experienced severe political or other trauma.’ These are not charges to be taken lightly, and the editors’ cogent theoretical, methodological and ethical challenges to this position are offered alongside the invitation to listen to stories in new and creative ways.

The subsequent chapters in *Beyond Narrative Coherence* cover three thematic territories. Essays by Maria I. Medved and Jens Brockmeier, Lars-Christer Hydén and Tarja Aaltonen address what are frequently described and occasionally dismissed as the ‘broken’ narratives of people suffering from dementia, aphasia, brain injury and other neurological conditions. Maria Tamboukou, Linda Sandino, Vilma Hänninen and Anja Koski-Jännes turn their attention to the narratives of those who are culturally sanctioned to exercise creative licence: poets, painters and visual artists. Finally, two essays by Alison Stern Perez,

Yishai Tobin and Shifra Sagy, and by Molly Andrews, confront the challenges to narrative and psychological coherence mounted by political violence and trauma. The methodological diversity of this collection is one of its great strengths; a wide range of qualitative approaches in narrative studies are showcased, and each chapter contributes to a sophisticated overall portrait of current trends in narrative theory. Readers with specific interests in the three thematic areas just described will be richly rewarded.

However, notwithstanding the individual merits of each essay, the volume as a whole does not move as far beyond the paradigm of narrative coherence as the editors' introduction would suggest. As Mark Freeman observes in his excellent Afterword, 'nearly every chapter in this book seeks to show that, behind the *manifest* in-coherence or "a-coherence" of the narratives in question a *latent* coherence lurks.' Narratives may initially appear to be baffling, bizarre, or broken, but through finely calibrated acts of interpretation and (re)contextualisation, an underlying coherence and even authenticity emerges. Tamboukou's lively study of the letters and paintings of the poet Gwen John is the exception here. She writes that: 'Being conceived beyond the boundaries of sequentially structured narratives, psychosocial states of mind and semiotic registers, John's letters carry traces of deterritorializations, lines of flight and eruptions; they become planes for the emergence of the unconditioned, the unthought of; they compose a world of verbs not of subjects – becomes not states of being.' Yet it is Tamboukou's elegant engagement with the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, as much as the object of her analysis, which all but guarantees an escape from the snares of narrative coherence, leaving unclear what value, precisely, the concept of 'narrative' has in such an analysis.

By deploying new methodologies and interrogating the conventional wisdoms of narrative psychology, the essays in *Beyond Narrative Coherence* call into question what Galen Strawson (2004) has elsewhere critiqued as the ‘ethical Narrativity thesis,’ namely, the widely held belief that narrative coherence is not only desirable but in fact ‘essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood.’ In this way, this volume stands to contribute to ongoing debates raised by Strawson and other radical critics of narrativity. The key question it raises, however, is whether (manifest) narrative a-coherence is found or even accepted only in exceptional cases or circumstances. I do not wish to imply any great similarity between states of neurocognitive deficit, artistic creativity, and trauma other than to note their status as culturally recognised departures from the norms of human experience. So if, as the editors’ suggest, ‘the imperative of coherence works to legitimize certain narratives while excluding or marginalizing others from the narrative canon,’ an important next step for moving beyond narrative coherence will be to extend analyses such as those presented in this volume to people and situations not customarily understood to be exceptional. A second volume along these lines would most surely be a welcome addition to the scholarship and a fuller realisation of the paradigm-shifting vision so powerfully articulated by the editors.

References:

Strawson, G. (2004). Against narrativity. *Ratio*, 17: 428-52.

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